

NARRATIVES

*Joshua Adair***COURTING CONTROVERSY:
HOW I BECAME AN OPPORTUNISTIC
IMPROVISATIONALIST**

These days my teaching might be best described as opportunistic improvisation. I am a “negative thinker” according to J. Jack Halberstam’s definition:

For the nonbelievers outside the cult of positive thinking, however, the failures and the losers, the grouchy, irritable whiners who do not want to “have a nice day” and who do not believe that getting cancer has made them better people, politics offer a better explanatory framework than personal disposition. For these negative thinkers, there are definite advantages to failing. Relieved of the obligation to keep smiling through chemotherapy or bankruptcy, the negative thinker can use the experience of failure to confront the gross inequalities of everyday life in the United States. (4)

Because I mostly teach in the Gender and Diversity Studies program at my university, those “gross inequalities” are often the focus of our class discussions anyway and I endeavor to highlight and to expose my students to these issues however possible. Unfortunately, the world we live in somehow always manages to serve as my accomplice in this process by presenting some new, disturbing set of circumstances which I can unexpectedly introduce into my classroom whether or not it actually fits with what the syllabus claims we’ll be doing that day. In my classroom, syllabi are like love letters – full of promises and sweet suggestions but only slightly conversant with reality. If I expect my students to begin to confront the racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, ageism, and the dozens of other –isms that plague our lives, I need for them to experience such difficulty firsthand, not only from a textbook.

University campuses are rife with such opportunities, one need only vaguely pay attention and be willing to abandon that day’s or week’s plan. Several years ago as I was watching the local evening news I was surprised to learn that my university had become the target of controversy because some groups of students had created a number of racist Twitter feeds against specific groups of people – primarily blacks and Asians – and several students were speaking out about it on that program. Though her face had been blurred, I immediately recognized a former Gender and Diversity student – a young woman from Korea – talking about the humiliation and pain she experienced upon discovering her own picture captioned with hateful comments on one of the feeds. She expressed her grave sadness at learning how much she is despised by some groups of Americans. Apart from the terrible sadness I felt for her and the sense of isolation and alienation I imagined she must be enduring, I was also mad as hell and determined to let someone know it.

The next day I went into both classes I was teaching at the time, one an Introduction to Gender and Diversity Studies and the other a Research in Literary Studies, and addressed the issue with all my students. Well, unleashed might be a more accurate term. Even though

most people might not consider such a discussion germane in the realm of literary research, I figured talking about humans, their motivations, and frequently despicable behavior, couldn't possibly be more relevant since that's why we read literature. It was a small class and my students looked shocked and overwhelmed as I projected images of the various tweets I'd tracked down. I'd intended only to devote a few minutes to the discussion so that I might charge the students with the task of taking action. Once I started talking, though, I unintentionally improvised on my own improv and choked up. The students, who I imagined were feeling pure horror that I might break into full-on tears, surprised me by starting to express their own rage at the cruelty of the comments and the cowardly behavior that characterized the entire situation. It was an uncomfortable moment for all of us – and an embarrassing one for me as I don't care to show emotion publicly – but I also suspect it may be the only real lesson I taught that group. To this day I still hear from three of them (about half the class) and I know for certain that the majority of them got involved in letter writing campaigns and other responses on campus aimed at shutting down those Twitter feeds and trying to build a better environment for all students.

When I entered the second class that day I chagrined myself by responding similarly, unable to control my emotions when I thought about the stories I'd heard on the news the night before. I extended my performance from the earlier class to make an official assignment out of addressing the problem and I asked my students to brainstorm responses on the spot. Improvisation and immediacy demanded that we think on our feet and abandon the day's planned work. Students began texting their friends and asking for ideas and figuring out responses. A few tech-savvy students initiated a plan that eventually caused at least two of the feeds to be shut down – a result that I would never have anticipated my students might catalyze. Others generated slogans for response pins and t-shirts. Because they could see that I cared – that I was being authentic, honest, and angry right in front of them with no filter – I believe they also sensed that this was a real moment and one to which they could respond and attempt to create a change. The experience of that single class period together changed the tone of that semester because suddenly I was suddenly a real person to them with genuine concerns who didn't give a shit about that day's readings given the circumstances.

If these examples sound very *Dead Poet's Society* to you, I apologize, because they weren't. I left the second class with a headache, feeling exhausted and vulnerable in a way that I find quite discomfiting. In retrospect, those were great moments that beautifully illustrated for my students the necessity of taking action and contributing to the communities in which we live. I could never have purposefully designed such a moment, nor is it necessarily replicable in any reliable way. I have followed similar impulses in response to other events, like those that transpired in Ferguson, MO, in the fall of 2014, for example, and experienced results that were both heartening and gut-wrenching. A colleague and close friend of mine decided that after closely monitoring the events related to the murder of Michael Brown and witnessing the insidious ways that racism still plays out on a daily basis on our campus that we would stage a campus-wide protest against racism, gun violence, and police militarization. If staging a protest against racism sounds a bit like dedicating oneself to holding back a tidal wave with a toothpick, it is. On our mid-sized rural Southern campus, though, we decided that taking a stand against a concept as broad and monolithic as racism still managed to be radical enough to cause something, but what we didn't know.

We hurriedly organized this event over the course of about five days using social media and creating poster board signs with messages like Martin Luther King's phrase "no justice, no peace." Once again I was teaching Introduction to Gender and Diversity Studies, this time paired with a first-year writing course, and since we met on Tuesdays and Thursdays I was

able to announce the protest on the following Tuesday in Thursday's class. We had set the start time fifteen minutes before the class dismissed because I intended to parade the entire class to the event so that they might experience a live protest and hopefully join in. The improvisational nature of this event meant that even though we had planned its basic elements, we had no idea what to expect once it started. As the day grew closer, word spread about the protest and my colleague and I started receiving numerous emails from administrators and fellow faculty concerned about the event's purpose and expressing fear that we might not be able to guarantee students' safety. Though we would like to live in a world where safety might be completely assured, we both knew that our decision to take a stand was risky. We forged ahead though – cognizant of the potential danger and backlash – because we wanted our students to grasp the stakes and hopefully learn the value of forsaking one's safety and comfort in the service of trying to help others.

Many of my students were visibly uncomfortable at the notion of the event and expressed dismay that they were being forced to attend, if only for the fifteen minutes (ten actually, with the walk time) at the end of class. I felt conflicted about demanding that students participate in a protest for what I consider a worthwhile cause, but I took the risk anyway. Once we arrived, though, I felt certain I'd made the right choice not because it turned out to be a hand-holding kumbaya-fest, but because the environment was electric: over a hundred people assembled – some to participate, some to gawk – and chanting and singing broke out. Some of my students and others I'd taught in the past, immediately joined the group, looking both afraid and elated. Others opted to drift to the margins and quietly escape when they thought I wouldn't notice. It was a spectacle, without doubt, and one which was covered by the local media for several weeks as we re-staged the event a few times. For many of those students, that may be their only real experience of protest and making one's voice heard, and even if they hated the experience I still consider it worthwhile.

The protest and surrounding activities garnered mixed results. Some students took to the activity and causes with passion and worked to host other events and start additional initiatives on campus. Other students, passers-by we believe, made anonymous racist social media posts in response to the demonstration, some threatening violence against the protesters and black people on campus. The weeks and months following that protest were filled with numerous anti-racism events, public dialogue in various fora about the issues, and a sense of unrest fomented by this impromptu moment of speaking out. It was simultaneously exhausting, disruptive, and captivating because none of us knew exactly what to think or do next, but we felt that we had done something worthwhile and engaged in "real life" as opposed to the sense of detachment that so frequently characterizes what transpires in a traditional university classroom dominated by the arbitrary demands of a syllabus and controlled by an instructor resistant to the radical potential of improvisation.

REFERENCES

Halberstam, J. J. (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Raleigh, NC: Duke University Press